



Ranking Republican, Senate Agriculture and Rural Economic Development Committee

Nov. 6, 2009

Dear Neighbors,

The other day I was talking about bird hunting with someone who'd read a newspaper column from southwest Washington about the state's efforts to rejuvenate pheasant habitat.

The state fish and wildlife department reports pheasant hunting is better around irrigated fields – and I would agree, even though the edges of fields don't get watered as much as they used to (thanks to advances in irrigation technology that allow much more precise delivery of water).

It's interesting that the state Partnerships for Pheasants program, which pays landowners to "plant and maintain high quality habitat" and allow public hunting, is aimed at enhancing pheasant habitat *without* irrigation. Aren't the salmon in the Columbia and Snake river basins willing to share some water with their feathered friends?

I managed to get out recently with the dog and the shotgun to check the status of our pheasant population, and had an enjoyable "hunting experience," as the people in Olympia would call it. There aren't too many better ways to spend a fine fall day!

Hello, "Agriculture and Natural Resource Land Management Agency"?

Coming into this year our state had 470 boards and commissions. There was a lot of talk during the legislative session about significantly reducing that number, and the wheat and barley commissions set a noble example by voluntarily merging, using language I introduced in a Senate bill.

In the end the number of boards and commissions was reduced by just 18, with vows made to look for other opportunities. For example, the new state budget instructed the state's natural resources agencies – which include the Department of Agriculture – to "consider the experience of other states and their organizational structures to identify consolidation opportunities to improve service delivery and reduce costs."

Of the states surveyed for the resulting report (click [here](#) to read it), only Rhode Island does not have a stand-alone ag department. Maryland is folding its agriculture agency into its Department of Natural Resources (an idea proposed unsuccessfully in Maine in 2008).

A work group looked at consolidating natural resource agencies and other agencies' natural resource-related activities (I count 18, there probably are more) into several structures: two-agency, three-agency and so on.

In a three-agency model, for example, one of the three would be a new Agriculture and Natural Resource Land Management Agency, combining programs now at the ag department and DNR with the habitat lands management now at the Department of Fish and Wildlife; conservation lands (natural areas and natural resources conservation areas); landowner technical assistance provided by the State Conservation Commission; certain regulatory programs related to working lands; and all forest fire prevention and control programs.

The work group report stresses these are "ideas," not recommendations, which will, "along with other ideas gathered from many sources...help stimulate critical thinking among governmental partners, decision-makers, stakeholders, the public, and elected officials." Either way I'll be keeping an eye on this to see if it produces legislation for the 2010 session or surfaces in the governor's upcoming supplemental budget proposal.

End to field burning tax exemption proposed: your thoughts?

For three years now the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee -- the state counterpart to the feds' Government Accounting Office -- has been reviewing tax exemptions and forwarding its recommendations to a group created by the Legislature in 2006: the Citizens Commission for Performance Measurement of Tax Preferences.

That commission recently endorsed JLARC's recommendation that the Legislature allow the sales and use tax exemption for field burning equipment to expire, "because the transition to reduced air emissions from agriculture burning has occurred."

JLARC figures the exemption, enacted in 2005 (RCW [82.08.841](#), [82.12.841](#)) allowed farmers to keep about \$2 million in 2008.

Olympia's financial situation is so lousy that tax preferences like this (which too many lawmakers like to call "loopholes") are easy targets. Do you believe it's time to put this particular exemption out to pasture? Please write or phone me with your opinion.

Stock watering work group off to a fair start

While I was at the Capitol last month for committee assembly days I sat in on

what I believe was the only big meeting so far of the work group set up to examine the stock watering issue.

Senator Jim Honeyford, R-Sunnyside, and Senator Bob Morton, R-Kettle Falls, are the colleagues of mine with seats on the work group, and did a fine job of speaking on behalf of agriculture at the October meeting.

I came away with a couple of things worth reporting. First, Sen. Phil Rockefeller, D-Bainbridge Island, acting as the group's chairman, seems to have a pretty good understanding of how this issue affects agriculture and demonstrated that in a lengthy memo he shared.

Second, Sen. Brian Hatfield, D-Raymond, is firmly on the side of agriculture – another positive sign, considering Hatfield is just about to wrap up his first year as chairman of the Senate Agriculture and Rural Economic Development Committee.

The stock watering issue arose in the Legislature this year after a water right transfer was requested for the construction of a big cattle feedlot in

Franklin County. The issue has since become the subject of a lawsuit filed in Thurston County (as the seat of state government). One of the work group members, from an environmental advocacy group, is a plaintiff in that lawsuit.



Water rights aren't an issue only in our state; you may be familiar with the struggle going on over water access in central California's farm country, where a Senate Republican staff member recently photographed these directly worded signs.



It remains to be seen whether the stock water group gets in another full meeting (meaning legislators join in) before Dec. 1, when a report on its activities is due, as the remaining committee assembly days this year are Dec. 3 and 4.

Congress OKs money for Odessa aquifer study

I met recently with the Columbia Basin Development League and got to share in some good news: the Energy and Water Development appropriations bill with \$3 million for the Odessa Subarea Special Study passed Congress this past month. Assuming the president signs the bill, that money keeps us moving toward the day when Columbia Basin Project surface water is substituted for the groundwater on which many irrigators and communities above the Odessa aquifer now rely.

On the calendar:

November

Wed., Nov. 11 and Thurs., Nov. 12 – PNW Vegetable Association Annual Conference and Trade Show, Kennewick (information: 509-585-5460 or www.pnva.org)

Wed., Nov. 11 through Sat., Nov. 14 – Annual Meeting and Trade Show, Washington Cattlemen's Association, Pasco (Red Lion Hotel, registration deadline Oct. 5, visit <http://www.washingtoncattlemen.org/conventioninfo.htm> to register or phone 509-925-9871)

Thurs., Nov. 19 and Fri., Nov. 20 – Annual Convention, Washington Association of Wheat Growers, Spokane (Davenport Hotel, registration fee increases after Oct. 28; for more information visit www.washingtongrainalliance.com or phone 509-659-0610)

Share Ag Alert! and suggest items for the calendar

If you have a meeting or other newsworthy event to submit for the calendar, or know someone who may want to receive Ag Alert! on a regular basis, please have them contact my legislative assistant Krista Winters at winters.krista@leg.wa.gov or phone my Olympia office (1-800-562-6000 or 360-786-7620). To receive Ag Alert! please provide an e-mail address and residential address. Thanks.

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